

## RUSSIA'S GREATEST HERETIC

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In this year Slavic Christians of all traditions are commemorating the thousandth anniversary of the conversion of Rus'-Ukraine, and with the commemoration are paying fresh attention to the religious and theological legacy of all of Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Christendom, including Orthodox Russia. Ironically, however, the best-known representative of religious and theological thought in Russian history was not a spokesman for the Orthodox legacy at all, but was, by almost any acceptable definition, a heretic: Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy.<sup>1</sup>

In June 1883, Ivan Sergeevich Turgenev wrote the following heartrending words to Tolstoy:

My dear, my beloved Lev Nikolayevich, I have not written to you for a long time, for I have been ill, and I am, as a matter of fact, on my deathbed. I cannot recover, and there is no use thinking that I can. I am writing to tell you how gratified I am to have been your contemporary, and to address one final plea to you: My friend, come back to your work in literature! That gift of yours proceeds from the same Source as everything else does. How happy I would be if I could think that my plea would influence you! ... My friend, great writer of the Russian land, hear my entreaty!

With this, the last letter he would ever write, Turgenev, as he lay dying in Paris, made one final effort to persuade Tolstoy to give up his obsession with theology and to return to his primary vocation as a creative writer. Turgenev's plea did not succeed in changing Tolstoy's mind, but it did set a pattern that has been followed by most critics of Tolstoy, whether Slavic or Western. Maxim Gorky found Tolstoy's language about Christ to be "peculiarly impoverished, lacking in enthusiasm"; Tomáš Masaryk concluded that "Tolstoy's manner of

<sup>1</sup>For the sake of readers who do not have access to Russian, I shall cite Tolstoy's works on the basis of easily available English translations (using their systems of transliterating the Cyrillic alphabet), and shall do so within the text rather than in footnotes, employing the following system of abbreviations:

AK Anna Karenina (New York: Modern Library, 1965);

C The Cossacks (Great Short Works [New York, 1967], pp. 83-243);

D The Devil (Great Short Works, pp. 303-51);

FS Father Sergius (Great Short Works, pp. 501-45);

HM Hadji Murád (Great Short Works, pp. 547-667);

II The Death of Ivan Ilych (Great Short Works, pp. 235-301);

KS The Kreutzer Sonata (Great Short Works, pp. 353-449);

R Resurrection (New York: Penguin Classics, 1966);

WP War and Peace (New York: Signet Classics, 1968).

feeling and thinking are in fact nothing so much as pantheistic"; Thomas Mann characterized Tolstoy's thought after his conversion as theologische Grübelelei; and my late colleague Henri Peyre described Tolstoy's screed of 1898, *What Is Art?*, as "one of the least intelligent books ever written." Now a theological aesthetic that ends up preferring Uncle Tom's Cabin to King Lear must, I suppose, be suspect on the face of it. Yet, as in Turgenev's letter, much of the criticism is based upon a dichotomy between Tolstoy the religious thinker and Tolstoy the creative writer, as well as upon a dichotomy between the early Tolstoy and the late Tolstoy. Neither of these dichotomies seems very precise in the light of the evidence. For a while he did become more radical as he grew older, it is evident from his diaries that his preoccupation with theology and with the person of Jesus was there almost from the beginning. And an analysis of his most important creative works will show, I believe, that his quest for the true gospel, heretical though it may be, underlies many of his novels and stories as well as his professedly theological writings. It is such an analysis of the gospel in Tolstoy's fiction that I propose to set forth in this Gerety Lecture (which, as will be evident, could be, and perhaps will be, expanded into a small monograph), by examining how he treats certain elements in the faith and worship of Russian Orthodoxy and by relating his conception of the gospel to this.

In *Anna Karenina* Tolstoy used the friendship of Kitty and Varenka as an occasion to contrast the two basic kinds of religion: that which Kitty had known in her Orthodox childhood, "a lofty, mysterious religion," which consisted in "liturgies and vespers" and "in learning by heart Slavonic texts with the priest"; and that which Varenka practiced, which found its characteristic expression in "reading the Gospel to the sick, the criminals, and the dying" (AK 236-37). Elsewhere one of his characters drew a distinction between a religion of "mysteries" and a religion of "precepts" (WP 130). When Tolstoy put his hand to describing the first of these forms of religion, his eye for detail and his sense of irony combined to give his readers striking insights into the anomalies of conventional piety. Thus in *Hadji Murád*, a work of his old age, he spoke of the liturgical prayers of the Tsar as the place "where God, through his servants the priests, greeted and praised Nicholas just as worldly people did" (HM 623). He was especially fond of noting the ironies created by the political and, above all, the military use of religion. Nekhlyudov, in the novel *Resurrection*, was taken aback to find an image of the Crucifixion in a prison, for he thought of Christ as a force for liberation, not for captivity (R 190); but later in the same novel, in the warden's office, he saw another such image, which by now had become "the customary appurtenance of all places of barbarity—a large image of Christ, as it were in mockery of his teaching" (R 237). As a young cadet aflame with his first love, Nekhlyudov had exemplified such an anomaly when, at the Easter liturgy, he had exchanged the traditional Church Slavonic greeting, "Christ is risen!—He is risen indeed!" (R 83); but all his thoughts were on the girl Katusha, later to become, as a result of his cruelty and lust, the prostitute Maslova. Thus also in *War and Peace* Nikolay was at his most devout in his prayers while he was yielding to his compulsive lust for gambling (WP 413), and again while he was waiting for the wolf during the hunt, praying with what Tolstoy called "that passionate compunction with which men pray in moments of intense emotion arising from trivial causes" (WP 604).

But as already noted, Tolstoy reserved his special irony for those instances in which religion served a political, and above all a military, interest. *Hadji Murád* satirized the official and impersonal letter informing the next-of-kin that a soldier had died "defending his Tsar, his Fatherland, and the Orthodox Faith" (HM 585). Repeatedly *War and Peace* referred to "the Russian Orthodox Army" (WP 198, 210, 455). Already in *The Cossacks* Tolstoy had lampooned the practice of the Cossack soldiers, who would draw a bead on their target and then would fire while reciting the formula "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost" (C 116), as well as other such uses of the trinitarian invocation (C 159). Like other observers of civil religion in the service of the military, including above all Abraham Lincoln, Tolstoy was grimly amused by the prospect of both sides after a battle offering up thanksgiving through their clergy for divine blessing on their warfare (WP 650); and in a superb

description of the prayer for Russia's deliverance from the armies of Napoleon, he rehearsed "that clear, mild, self-effacing tone peculiar to the Slav clergy, which acts so irresistibly on the Russian heart" as it invoked the protection of God against "those who hate us and our Orthodox faith" (WP 798-99).

As in the case of the liturgical prayer for the Russian people under siege, Tolstoy did sometimes manifest a capacity to resonate to the Orthodox liturgy, despite his existential alienation from it. In this respect as in others, he used the character of Levin in *Anna Karenina* to document his own fundamental ambivalences. At the beginning of Part Five, when Levin was urged to go to Holy Communion for the first time in nine years in preparation for his forthcoming marriage, his participation in the liturgy, together with his confession and conversation about religious doubt with the deacon (AK 460-64), can be read as a statement of such ambivalence: "Believe he could not, and at the same time he had no firm conviction that it was all wrong" (AK 461). Later, attending the cathedral in Moscow while awaiting the birth of their child, he participated in the liturgy, affirming "I kiss the Cross" and sharing in the worship (AK 676). Later still, at the birth of their child, he found himself, "for some reason," repeating the words of the liturgy, *Gospodin pomiluy* (AK 738). Although he continued to have his intellectual difficulties with the Christian faith, he "turned to God just as trustfully and simply as he had in his childhood and first youth" (AK 742-43). In a parallel to these presentations of Levin's faith which appears in the story of Father Sergius, written in 1898, Tolstoy identified the commitment to which Stepan Kasatsky (Stiva) turned when he discovered his fiancée's past as the Tsar's former mistress as "God, the faith of his childhood which had never been destroyed in him" (FS 509). The liturgical scenes in *War and Peace* were likewise shaped by this ambivalence. He had Pierre speak of those who "were growing up and dying with no idea of God and truth beyond ceremonies and meaningless prayers" (WP 466); he dismissed the Christmas liturgy with a brusque obiter dictum (WP 625); and he had Kutuzov define boredom as being obliged to attend a church service (WP 893). Yet he could also speak sympathetically of those who took the liturgy seriously, and could have Natasha at an Orthodox liturgy react with a combination of lassitude and fascination to "that hushed solemnity that has so elevating and soothing an effect on the souls of the worshippers" (WP 797).

Within the Russian Orthodox liturgy there were certain features that inevitably figured in Tolstoy's narratives. One of these was the so-called Jesus prayer, which consisted in the repetition, over and over, of the name of Jesus, accompanied by breath control and other exercises. It had been developed by the ascetic fathers of the patristic and Byzantine periods and during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was given wide circulation in Russia and beyond through the efforts of the Ukrainian monk, Paisy Velitchkovsky (1722-94). Such a practice would lend itself to caricature very easily, but almost certainly there can never have been a parody of it more devastating than that which appeared in the censored portions of Tolstoy's novel, *Resurrection* (R 182-83). Set as it was in the context of the imprisonment of Maslova, who because of the injustice she was suffering had ceased to believe in God and goodness (R 177), this recitation of the name of Jesus with infinite variations took on an especially bitter irony, which was compounded by the further observation, as Tolstoy observed at the end, that in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:7) Jesus had expressly forbidden all such empty liturgical chatter, which was now being carried on in his name - and even with his name (R 184). Yet in another work, *Father Sergius*, which was contemporary with the writing of *Resurrection*, Tolstoy was able to treat the Jesus prayer more sympathetically. Here Sergius fought against sexual temptation by praying before an icon of Christ crowned with thorns: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner!" and doing so over and over "unceasingly" (FS 521). He did so again as the temptation intensified (FS 523, 534); and although the prayer of itself proved ineffectual, as indeed even the more extreme ascetic acts of Father Sergius did, Tolstoy here spared us the heavy-handed sarcasm that marked and, I believed, marred his account of the liturgy and the Jesus prayer in *Resurrection*.

A similar oscillation between sarcasm and sympathy was evident in Tolstoy's treatment of icons and of sacraments (one could almost say "of icons and of other sacraments"). In many scenes of Tolstoy's books, icons were simply part of the furniture, as for example in the prison scenes mentioned earlier or in the scene from *War and Peace* after the fire in Moscow, when "all sorts of household goods had been thrown in heaps: featherbeds, a samovar, icons, and trunks" (WP 1107; cf. 994). Yet when forced to choose among items of furniture during the evacuation, the Rostov family had left behind the Count's books as "not needed" but had taken along "the most precious [icons], those with which family traditions were connected" (WP 1036-37). Wonder-working icons of the Mother of God were not only a part of folk piety (WP 475); but the icon of the Mother of God of Smolensk was "our defender" in battle, which Kutuzov kissed "in a naive, childish way" (WP 917-19), as later he was to give thanks before the icons for the salvation of Russia (WP 1225). The icon of the Iberian Mother of God was carried into battle (WP 998), and into hospitals for the wounded after battle (WP 1013). The greatest contribution that the Orthodox Church could make to the war effort was the gift of an icon of Saint Sergius to the Tsar (WP 1118). The alliance of superstition and cynicism in the cult of icons was well described by the character Toporov in *Resurrection*, who, in a tone that is in some way reminiscent of the Grand Inquisitor, made it clear that he himself did not believe in anything, but that the devotion to the icons, while of course idolatrous was necessary to keep the common people content (R 382-83), and by Vasily Andreyevich in *Master and Man*, who saw the icons as necessary in church but useless in a crisis (MM 493-94).

It is evident from some of these scenes, however, that Tolstoy's attitude toward the worship of icons was not always one of scorn, but sometimes one of condescension or amusement or even sympathy. He was, for example, obviously positive in his treatment of Kutuzov's tearful prayer of thanksgiving before the icons after Napoleon's retreat from Russia: "Lord, my Creator, Thou hast heard our prayer. Russia is saved" (WP 1225). He had reported, on the other hand, that an icon of the Pantocrator had been disfigured by a young "smart-aleck" (WP 1015). Between these two references to icons in *War and Peace* came the charming vignette of Platon Karatayev, "the personification of every-thing Russian, kindly, and rotund" (WP 1161). After describing how his father had lined up all his children in front of the icons of the saints, Platon himself said his evening prayers, including the petition, "Lord, lay me down like a stone, and raise me up like a loaf;" but also prayers to various saints, including two unknown names, who were, as he explained to a puzzled Pierre, "the horses' saints." In one of the prison scenes in *Resurrection* we meet an old woman saying her prayers before her icons (R 157), later to be identified for us as Menshova, unjustly imprisoned for arson (R 178); her devotion to her graven images, apparently, was no mortal sin of idolatry but at most a venial one. Later in the same novel Tolstoy introduced Katerina Ivanovna, who was an adherent of an Evangelical sect and believed that the essence of Christianity was belief in justification by faith alone, without ritual or icon or sacrament; nevertheless she kept an icon in every room and did not appear to find that inconsistent. Tolstoy does not seem to have approved of all this, but one gets the sense that her doctrine of sola fide offended his view of the gospel more than did her adherence to these vestigial remnants of Russian Orthodoxy (R 325). Both of the main characters in *Master and Man* were iconodules; but Vasily Andreyevich was a ritualist, who believed that it was necessary to light a candle to the icons (snuffing it out quickly so that it could be used again), but knew that they were useless when he was dying (MM 493-94), while Nikita was a muzhik, whose wish to die at home "under the icons, with a lighted candle in his hand" was fulfilled and who therefore died at peace with his family, with himself, and with his God (MM 500).

This comfort from the icons as the believer faced death was part of the system of support provided by the Orthodox Church to its faithful especially in that awesome and sacred hour. As such, it belonged with the final confession of sins, with the terminal anointing of holy chrism, and with the last reception of Holy Communion (or viaticum, as it is called in the Latin Church). Almost all the references to these last rites in Tolstoy's novels and stories were sympathetic, not least because of Tolstoy's own profound feelings of reverence before the mysterium tremendum of death; this is evident, for example, in Kitty's sense of urgency about extreme unction for her brother-in-law (AK 522-23). Ivan Ilyich at first rejected the idea of taking Communion and then went along with it to satisfy his wife, but when he did take it he derived momentary comfort from it and "received the sacrament with tears in his eyes" (II 300). Although the administration of extreme unction to Count Bezukhov in *Book One, Part I of War and Peace* (WP 104-6) was quite perfunctory, complete with a priest who called it "an awesome sacrament" as he "ran his hand over his bald head," later uses of sacraments on the deathbed in that novel were significantly more constructive. Thus even Natasha was helped in her convalescence by praying before the icon of the Mother of God and receiving Holy Communion, even though the doctor took credit for the joy and peace she had gained (WP 793-95). (Tolstoy's exquisite scorn for clergy was surpassed only by his contempt for physicians.) Her father, filled with remorse over not being able to leave his family a proper inheritance, "receive Communion and the final chrism and died peacefully" (WP 1361). And her former fiancé, Andrey Nikolayevich Bolkonsky, likewise slipped away from this life peacefully: He took leave of his loved ones, said his confession, and received Holy Communion (WP 1177).

By contrast with his treatment of icons and especially of final sacraments, Tolstoy's frequent references to the practice of making the sign of the cross were only rarely positive. Most of the time it was described, for example in the case of Dimitry Olenin in *The Cossacks*, as "an old habit of his childhood" (C 164), or in the case of Masha in *Family Happiness* as "an old custom" (FH 39), or in the case of Kutuzov as "clearly habitual" (WP 213) - although later on, when he made the sign of the cross and said a prayer upon hearing of the death of Prince Nikolay Bolkonsky, it may have been more (WP 891). At the wake for Ivan Ilyich, Pyotr Ivanovich was not sure

what to do; all he knew was that at such a time "it is always safe to cross oneself" (II 249). The old man at the beginning of *The Kreutzer Sonata* made the sign of the cross three times (KS 357), as did Nikita in *Master and Man* (MM 472) and Yakov Alpatych, the faithful servant of the Bolkonsky family in *War and Peace* (WP 835). In *Resurrection*, where liturgy and piety generally came off very poorly, making the sign of the cross before and after eating was compared to using one's napkin at table (R 382); it was explicitly described as part of the hypocrisy with which Selyenin deceived himself into reaffirming the Orthodox faith (R 366); and in an extended conversation with an old man who refused to make the sign of the cross, Nekhlyudov recognized the difference between such traditional acts of piety and authentic religious faith (R 533-35). Sometimes this practice became more sinister. Balaga Makarin, the speed demon who was about to use his skills as a troyka-driver to help the rake Anatol Kuragin in his seduction of Natasha, crossed himself as he entered the room to meet Anatol and Fyodor Ivanyich Dolokhov (WP 706). For the record it should be noted that there are instances in Tolstoy's writings in which the sign of the cross had a neutral or even a constructive role; for example, the protagonist in Tolstoy's story of 1905, *Alyosha the Pot, we are told*, "did not know how to pray at all. His mother had once taught him the words, but he had forgotten them even as she spoke. Nevertheless, he did pray, morning and evening, but simply, just with his hands, crossing himself" (AP 673-74), and he did so with a priest in the hour of his death (AP 677). And while Andrey was asking her parents for Natashd's hand, we see Natasha herself "pale and dry-eyed, gazing at the icon and whispering something as she rapidly crossed herself" (WP 578). But it is much more characteristic even of *War and Peace* when Tolstoy described the mourners at old Prince Bolkonsky's bier as "crossing themselves, like horses shying, snorting, and jostling around a dead horse" (WP 865).

It is obvious, then, that for Tolstoy Russian Orthodoxy was a false gospel, but his specific treatment of Orthodoxy deserves nevertheless to be summarized, if not belabored. We would expect a remark like the one in *Resurrection* to the effect that all the Germans who belonged to the bureaucracy of the Russian civil service were, of course, devout members of the Orthodox Church (R 43). But there were three long passages in that book where Tolstoy analyzed Orthodoxy more thoroughly, though not, to be sure, any more favorably. The first of these was a classification of the various reasons underlying the acceptance of Orthodoxy but its several kinds of adherents: the priest who did not believe the dogma of the Church, but who did "believe that one ought to believe it"; the subdeacon who "sang and read what he had to sing and read as a matter of course, just as another man sells wood or flour or potatoes"; the warden and others, who "believed that one must believe in this faith because the higher authorities and the Tsar believed in it"; and the prisoners, including Maslova herself, who believed that the Orthodox ritual "possessed a mystic power by means of which a great many comforts might be obtained, in this life and in the life to come" (R 184-87). Although this disquisition was basically an interruption in the narrative even of this extremely didactic novel, the other two discussions of Orthodoxy were integrated more successfully into the story, probably because each of them was part of a total characterization. In the portrait of Selyenin, once Nekhlyudov's fellow student, Tolstoy included a diagnosis of "the great lie" by which he had found his way back to a reaffirmation of the Orthodox faith, through the study of such writers as the lay theologian Aleksei Khomyakov (R 364-66), whom Levin in *Anna Karenina* had also read on the doctrine of the nature of the Church (AK 821). And the character Toporov in *Resurrection* was a man who himself believed nothing, but who adhered to Orthodoxy and enforced it because of his concern about the common people (R 382-83).

Tolstoy also used his narratives to reflect on the relation of Eastern Orthodoxy to other faiths. The contrasts between Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism inevitably played a part in his account of the war between the Russians and the French (WP 117, 660); but the most memorable use of this contrast in *War and Peace* was the conversion of Pierre Bezukhov's frivolous wife Elena to Roman Catholicism, achieved of course by Jesuits (WP 1001, 1017), which made it "a simple, easy matter from the ecclesiastical point of view" for her to annul her senseless marriage. The differences among faiths also engaged Tolstoy more seriously, however. The old man whom Nekhlyudov met on the raft, the one who refused to make the sign of the cross, listed the various sects of Russian believers and concluded that there were different religions "just because people believe in other people and do not believe in themselves" (R 535). More profound and more complex was the reflection on this matter by Konstantin Levin in the final part of *Anna Karenina*. Once he had concluded that his sophomoric rejection of all religion was wrong (AK 819), he had to face the question (AK 847) whether "if the chief proof of the Divinity was his revelation of what is right, how is this revelation confined to the Christian Church alone?" Levin's conclusion was to confess: "To me individually, to my heart has been revealed a knowledge beyond all doubt, and unattainable by reason... [It] has been revealed to me as a Christian.... The question of other religions and of their relations to the Divinity I have no right to decide, and no possibility of deciding" (AK 849-50).

Levin (and Tolstoy) knew, however, that it was simply another form of self-deception if one replaced the claim of Orthodoxy to be the one true faith with a no less absolute reliance on one's own "mystical fervor" (AK 535). There were, as Father Sergius observed, "pilgrims who constantly tramped from one holy place to another and from one staret to another, and were always entranced by every shrine and every staret" (FS 530). As Tolstoy noted in *The Cossacks*, "a man is never so much an egotist as in moments of spiritual ecstacy" (C 87). In his novels, as in his public career, Tolstoy strove for justice to the sectarians, Evangelicals, and mystical groups, such as the Dukhobors, who were being persecuted by church and civil state. It was, he asserted through Nekhlyudov in *Resurrection*, a disgrace that the reading of the Gospel by the sectarians had become a criminal offense (R 416). But this indignation at persecution did not blind him to the dangers of private mysticism and arcane religiosity. The spiritual odyssey of Pierre in *War and Peace* took him for some time into the labyrinthine teachings of Freemasonry, to which he was introduced by the imposing figure of Iosif Alekseyevich Bazdeyev (WP 427-31). In these teachings Pierre found the genuine essence of Christianity, free of the interference of church or state (WP 470). After a while, however, he began to get the sense that "the more firmly he tried to rest on the ground of Freemasonry on which he had taken his stand, the more it was giving way under him" (WP 525). He did continue to probe various kinds of mysterious formulas and even worked out an exegesis of 666, the number of the Beast in the thirteenth chapter of the Book of Revelation, that identified Napoleon as the Beast and himself as the one destined to destroy the Beast (WP 801-2). But this, too, became "incomprehensible and even laughable" to him (WP 1208), and he found that Masonic speculations had lost their interest for him (WP 1077-78). For he learned "that God was greater, more infinite and unfathomable, than the Architect of the Universe whom the Freemasons acknowledged" and he learned this from the muzhik Platon Karatayev (WP 1320).

To the false gospel of Russian Orthodoxy Lev Tolstoy opposed what he regarded as the authentic gospel. In several full-length works of theology and biblical study he systematized his beliefs about God, about Christ, about the moral life, and about death and the life to come. In addition to these systematic treatises, Tolstoy also built his rediscovered gospel into his works of fiction, with greater or lesser success, embodying the precepts of the gospel in his characters. It was above all the Sermon on the Mount that performed this function in his stories and novels, so much so that it would be possible to reconstruct a considerable portion of it from the quotations scattered throughout his books. In many instances, moreover, these quotations came at a critical juncture in the development of Tolstoy's plots or characterizations.

The closing pages of *Resurrection* consisted of a kind of homily on the Gospels, which Nekhlyudov read with new eyes, seeing in the Sermon on the Mount "for the first time, not abstract beautiful thoughts, presenting for the most part exaggerated and impossible demands, but simple, clear, practical commandments, which if obeyed (and this was quite feasible) would establish a completely new -order of human society" (R 565-66). One such commandment in the Sermon on the Mount, which Tolstoy made basic to his theological and ethical thought, was the saying of Christ: "But I say to you, that ye resist not evil; but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matt. 5:39). This was the message which Nekhlyudov communicated to the prisoners (R 557), but that saying of Christ also played a part in the spiritual evolution of another of Tolstoy's characters, Aleksey Aleksandrovich Karenin. Through the early stages of Anna's infidelities he seemed to be little more than the usual pathetic and ridiculous cuckold, muttering such sentiments as "She is bound to be unhappy, but I am not to blame, and so I cannot be unhappy" (AK 299) and drawing upon his conventional view of Christianity as a justification for his coldness and attitude of moral superiority (AK 415). The Christian command to forgive did not apply in his case (AK 430). But as his struggle and his suffering continued, he caught a glimpse that it did apply and that he was to love and forgive his enemies, even his wife and her lover (AK 434). This he found in the word of Christ, "Turn the other cheek" (AK 453). Yet he continued to have a faith that was "erroneous and shallow" (AK 537), and so he turned back from his insight about forgiveness to declare with his old pomposity, when his brother-in-law suggested the possibility of a divorce: "I, as a believer, cannot, in a matter of such gravity, act in opposition to Christian law" (AK 754). If he had acted soon enough and obeyed his deep but momentary insight into what really was the Christian law, the commandment of the Sermon on the Mount, he might have saved his soul, if not his marriage, and might have averted the eventual tragedy.

Even more "exaggerated and impossible" in the opinion of many was the saying of the Sermon on the Mount a few verses earlier: "But I say unto you, that whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart.... And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee" (Matt.

5:30). The references to this saying described in the lives of the desert fathers prompted Yevgeniy Ivanich in *The Devil* to light a candle and put a finger into the flame when he was tempted to commit adultery; but he quickly pulled it back and blew out the flame (D 331). But Father Sergius in the story of that name did burn his hand to resist temptation; and when that did not work, he obeyed the words of Christ quite literally and chopped off his finger (FS 524). In *The Kreutzer Sonata* Tolstoy took his reading of these verses even further. For in the samizdat version of the story he set forth his exegesis of the words about committing adultery in the heart: They were not only a prohibition of lust for another than one's rightful spouse, but "specially and chiefly" they were directed against lust for one's own wife (KS 433-34, 449). The command of the Gospel was complete and utter chastity, even in marriage, and it was to be taken literally. So it was also with the words of the Sermon on the Mount about taking no thought for one's life, but being like the fowls of the air, which sow not, neither do they reap (Matt. 6:26); but it was only at the moment of death that Prince Andrey saw this, and he could not explain it, even to his sister (WP 1171).

If we look for the embodiment of the true gospel in Tolstoy's characters, we must turn to his portraits of various peasants. He was expressing his own conviction, seriously yet playfully, when he had Platon Karatayev in *War and Peace* (WP 1159) confuse the words Krestyanin (peasant) and Khristianin (Christian). Bringing his Father Sergius face to face with his childhood friend Praskovya Mikhaylovna (Pashenka), Tolstoy had him confess the difference between the church's gospel and the true gospel: "Pashenka is what I ought to have been but failed to be. I lived for men on the pretext of living for God, while she lives for God imagining that she lives for men" (FS 544-45). Another such peasant hero was Nabatov in *Resurrection*, who did not need abstract beliefs about God and immortality but lived in faith and dignity (R 504). The most complete of these portrayals of peasant believers was that of Karatayev, who brought to Pierre the revelation of the truth that he had vainly sought in cabalistic exegesis and Freemasonry. Karatayev lived in practice what the Gospels commanded, even though he could not theorize about it, for he "knew nothing by heart except his prayers" (WP 1163). And so his overcoat seemed to Pierre to be a priestly vestment (WP 1268), and his face was marked by "serene exaltation" As Masaryk put it, "in this predicament Tolstoy finds himself saved by the Russian muzhik."

Yet the supreme embodiment of the true gospel, and the most complete and profound portrayal of its meaning in the works of Tolstoy, was Princess Marya Nikolayevna Bolkonskaya in *War and Peace*. All the elements of conventional Russian Orthodox piety that we have catalogued were present in her. "May our divine Savior and His most Holy Mother keep you in their holy and almighty care" was how she would conclude a letter (WP 131). After the scene between her father and her brother and her brother's wife, she turned to the door when her brother had left and made the sign of the cross (WP 148). She was faithful in her attendance at church services, even at vespers (WP 1341). She was devoted to icons, not only having them on the wall of her room as others did (WP 473), but presenting one to her brother when he left for war: "Andrey, I bless you with his holy image, and you must promise me you will never take it off.... Against your will He will save you and have mercy on you; He will bring you to Himself, for in Him alone is truth and peace" (WP 144). When Andrey was wounded, he looked at the icon and remembered her faith (WP 359); and when she heard that he had been wounded fatally, she too thought of the icon and wondered whether he had come to faith at the end (WP 393). The heart of her own faith was as Tolstoy put it, "summed up in the one clear and simple law of love and self-sacrifice, laid down for us by Him who in His life had suffered for all mankind, though He Himself was - God" (WP 584). This was, Prince Andrey said, "the love which God preached to us on earth, and which Princess Marya tried to teach me" (WP 978). When she prayed, as Nikolay Rostov observed, it was not what his prayers and Natasha's had been as children, that snow might turn to sugar, but something "a little frightening" and awe-inspiring (WP 1140). This is not to say that prayer was something that came easily to her; often, in times of crisis, she found that she could not pray as she wanted to (WP 396, 859, 870, 879).

In the course of his description of Princess Marya, Tolstoy had her (or, as he would probably have preferred to say, since he regarded the characters of his books as real people, watched her) blossom also as a person. In the early portions of the novel, she was "awkward and devoid of grace" (WP 393), and even considerably later she was "a timorous maiden, no longer in her first youth, wasting the best years of her life in fear and mortal anguish" (WP 758). Yet she had always been "possessed of an ineffable beauty of sorrow and self-forgetfulness" (WP 393) and so was in fact "really not so plain" (WP 1132). As she matured spiritually, her "movements [became] full of grace and dignity" and she "began speaking in a voice that for the first time vibrated with a new, deep, womanly note" (WP 1135). For now "all that pure, spiritual inner travail through which she had lived appeared on the surface. All her spiritual searchings, her anguish, her strivings after goodness, her humility, self-sacrifice, and love - all this now shone in those luminous eyes, in the delicate smile, in every feature of her gentle face" (WP 1136). Her otherworldliness, which had marked her from the beginning, became even more pronounced; even amid family happiness, she sensed "another happiness, unattainable in this life" (WP 1381), for her "spirit was ever aspiring to the infinite, the eternal, the absolute, and therefore could never be at peace" (WP 1406). Although she married Nikolay Rostov, she kept this spiritual quality. She had always been sensitive to the potential conflict between the love of Christ and erotic love (WP 129-30). Sometimes she had vowed that she would never marry anyone, because her "vocation [was] a different one" (WP 286-87), and she had spoken of thoughts about marriage as temptations of the devil (WP 859). But at other times she had confessed that "There are moments when I would marry anyone!" (WP 661). When her marriage finally came, it only intensified the "spiritual treasures" that she had manifested earlier (WP 1374), and her husband Nikolay was filled with "awe at her spiritually, at the lofty moral world, almost beyond his reach, in which she dwelt" (WP 1403).

When I first read *War and Peace* more than fifty years ago, I, like, any teenaged boy, fell in love with Natasha. At the ball, you will remember, she herself was not in love with anyone but rather "in love with everyone" (WP 408), and possessed that quality of intuition about others that would instantly endear her to them (WP 288). It is obvious that Tolstoy felt the same way about Natasha. But each successive reading of the book has made it clearer to me that he reserved his deepest admiration for Princess Marya, whom he patterned after his mother. It is instructive to watch the relation between Natasha and Marya in Tolstoy's account. Their first meeting was anything but cordial (WP 671-72), and Marya wrote to Natasha to voice her concern over their misunderstanding (WP 695). When the engagement of Natasha and Marya's brother Andrey broke up, Marya could not repress her Schadenfreude (WP 723). Of course both Natasha and Marya were at fault, Natasha because of her flightiness and Marya because of a rather priggish Orthodox piety. But they were reconciled through the death of Prince Andrey, Natasha's former fiancé and Marya's brother, and they found in each other "comrades in grief" (WP 1167). They grew together; for "Natasha, who with a serene lack of understanding had formerly turned away from that life of devotion, submission, and the poetry of Christian sacrifice, now, feeling herself bound to Princess Marya by affection, learned to love her past as well and to understand a side of life she had no conception of before," while Marya for her part discovered "another, formerly uncomprehended, side of life: belief in life and its enjoyment" (WP 1292-93). Differences between them there continued to be, but according to Tolstoy "Natasha was sincere in acknowledging Marya's superiority", so long as she could count on the love of her husband Pierre (WP 1407).

How is it that this could end up being Tolstoy's most convincing depiction of the gospel in an individual life? He romanticized the simple piety of the muzhik, but Marya was a princess; he lampooned the beliefs and practices of Russian Pravoslavie, but she was thoroughly Orthodox in her liturgical, sacramental, and iconodule piety; he looked beyond the claims of a narrow Christianity to the religions of mankind, but she was content to be what she had been born to be, a devout member of the Russian Orthodox Church. Yet as such, she managed to practice all that Tolstoy celebrated as authentic, because she understood the Gospels. "'You know,' said Natasha, 'you are always reading the Gospels'" (WP 1375). It was teasing in its tone, but accurate in its description. At the center of Marya's Orthodox piety were the Gospel and the person of Christ. In our first introduction to her, her letter to Julie, we hear her say: "I have never been able to understand the passion certain people have for confusing their understanding by applying themselves to mystical books that only awaken doubts in the mind and excite the imagination, creating in them a tendency to exaggeration altogether contrary to Christian simplicity. Let us rather read the Gospels and the Epistles" (WP 130). Her image of Christ was Orthodox, combining the Christ of the Gospels with the Christ of icons, but it evoked from her the kind of obedience that Tolstoy saw as the essence of the Christian message. And so she managed to combine in herself what Tolstoy could not hold together himself, what in *Anna Karenina* he called "a lofty, mysterious religion of 'liturgies and vespers'" and a religion of compassion (AK 236-37) - or what she herself called "mysteries" and "precepts" (WP 130). More than any of his theological polemics, more than any of his heresies, this portrait of Princess Marya articulated Tolstoy's vision of life. And so, when Turgenev called him back from theology to literature, he recognized, and yet did not recognize, the essential, if extremely complicated, unity of the gospel according to Russia's greatest heretic, Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy.

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